



Greater Hartford Legal Aid

Appropriations Committee

March 3, 2011

**Testimony of Branford D. Brown
In support of Legal Services Funding (Judicial Branch budget)**

Good Evening,

Senator Harp, Representative Walker, Representative McCrory and members of the Committee,

I am Branford Brown, the executive director of Greater Hartford Legal Aid, a position I have held for a little more than 2 months. I am most recently from Cincinnati, Ohio, but I have spent most of my legal career working for legal service firms in Dayton, OH. I have also worked for Legal service organizations in both Louisville and Prestonsburg KY. I have also been an assistant prosecutor in two counties in Ohio.

I am here today representing Connecticut's Legal Services Network. Seated behind me are the Board Chairs and Executive Directors of Connecticut Legal Services, and New Haven Legal Assistance, and the Chair of my Board at Greater Hartford Legal Aid. I am here in support of and to offer thanks for your continued support for the provision of legal services to the impoverished communities of Connecticut.

Having worked directly and as a trainer of legal service advocates and managers throughout the country, I want to share my excitement in having the opportunity to serve in a state which recognizes and supports providing legal services to the poor. U.S. Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black said, "There can be no equal justice where the kind of trial a man gets depends on the amount of money he has."

The Legal Service organizations in Connecticut provide a vital service to a destitute community; the work is always needed and even more so in these hard times. Our staff has worked tirelessly providing life-changing help to people in great need, resulting in assistance to over 10,000 people in crisis each year —that's not including the collateral benefits to their family members.

Since taking up my job as director of Greater Hartford Legal Aid, I hear continuously of the strong support this state has shown for our work. Interest on Lawyer Trust Accounts, which the state established decades ago to fund legal aid, has collapsed and has not recovered. The funding solutions you created two years ago have kept legal aid going at a time when people need our help more than ever. Even with that help, our services have been cut

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substantially. Staffing in our programs is down 18% from where we were before the crisis, and as a result services are also reduced. We are also carefully watching the filing fee revenues you created, which dropped 11% in the most recent quarter. It is in this context that we are so appreciative that the Governor has not further cut legal aid funding in his proposed budget, putting adequate funds in the Judicial Branch budget to maintain the \$1.5 million in legal aid funding. And we are equally appreciative of the strong support of this Committee.

Our staffs provide an essential thread of assistance to people in Connecticut's safety net. We take referrals from all of Connecticut's courts, police, and social service agencies to help:

When low-income Connecticut residents have no place else to turn, legal aid advocates open doors to safety, health, and stability. I wish that I could share with you some of the hundreds of client surveys, letters and cards which posit that "I don't know what I would have done without the competent and passionate assistance of my legal aid attorney.

We are able to assist a variety of clients including;

- domestic violence victims,
- elderly people with nursing home and consumer issues,
- children in need of medical treatment,
- people with mental health problems,
- parents trying to keep their jobs,
- rent-paying families facing the eviction after foreclosure against their landlord, and any more.

Not only are we critical in protecting the rights and interest of our clients but by our skilled advocacy, legal aid keeps the courts from being more clogged and keeps some people from needing costly state interventions.

Our advocates achieve equal justice for low-income communities, work with clients to promote social justice, and address the effects and root causes of poverty. We make a difference and we are grateful to you for your continued support.

The words of Supreme Court Justice Learned Hand ring as true now as when he said them 60 years ago: "If we are to keep our democracy, there must be one commandment: thou shalt not ration justice."

Thank you for your time; we'd be happy to answer any questions.

Branford D. Brown
Executive Director
Greater Hartford Legal Aid, Inc.